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ABSTRACT

Examined were characteristics of stepfamilies and perceptions of their members. Participants were 151 married or previously married graduate students enrolled in an evening course offered by an urban, southern college. Data were collected through administration of a two-part survey. Part I focused on race, sex, marital status, and identification as a parent and/or stepparent. Five questions in Part II categorized respondents' stepfamily type. The remaining 31 questions were based on research findings dealing with attitudes, perceptions, and feelings held by stepparents. Findings disclosed several commonalities between parents in stepfamilies and parents in other family structures. Significant relationships were found between age and both parenting and stepparenting, and between parental age and marital status in both stepfamilies and all other family structures. Only 9.3 percent of participants were stepparents. In most cases, stepfamily formation was preceded by divorce, which suggests that the absent parent is living. Three variables, including time the stepfamily had been in existence, co-residence of stepsiblings, and absence of former spouse, were identified as significant determinants of successful stepfamilies. Roles of family members were unclear, making family interaction difficult. Although many similarities exist between stepfamilies and traditional families, the myth of the stepfamily continues, portraying this family form as a deviant social structure sought by none, held in esteem by few, and pitied by many. (RH)

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CHARACTERISTICS AND ATTITUDES OF PARENTS IN STEPFAMILIES

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CHARACTERISTICS AND ATTITUDES OF PARENTS IN STEPFAMILIES

The American family has undergone significant changes in the last 20 years. During this relatively short span of time statistics have shown an increase in the divorce rate, the number of parents who have never married, the emergence of women into the work force, remarriage, and serial marriage. Each of these societal trends has contributed to the dramatic increase in stepfamilies- a structure in which one or both parents brings with them one or more children from a previous marriage.

Stepparents are the most neglected parents in America Only very recently have a few greeting cards addressed to stepfamily members become available in stores. The absence of categorized census data on this major family structure is another example of the lack of recognition and acceptance of the stepfamily into society. School records and medical forms overlook this form of family style. The paucity of research on all components of stepfamilies is alarming, and much of the existing research is confounded, contradictory, and confusing.

The word stepfamily does not appear in most dictionaries. However, 25,000,000 American adults were stepparents and 15 million children under age 18 were stepchildren in 1975 (Visher & Visher, 1978). Of these children, approximately 6.6 million, or 1 in 10 children, lived primarily with a stepparent (Glick, 1976). That ratio had increased to 1 in 8 by 1980, or 13% of all children. By the end of this decade, it is predicted that 1 child in 4 will be a stepchild (Dodson, 1977).

Although the divorce rate has stabalized and, by some

estimates, dropped, of the more than 1 million couples who divorce each year, 4 of every 5 remarry, generally within 3 years. The most dominant form of remarriage is the stepfamily (Kent, 1980). It is expected that remarriages will soon outnumber first marriages, which clearly implies that the stepfamily will be the major form of family structure (Cherlin, 1978).

The stepfamily has been shrouded in mystery and burdened with negative connotations, probably stemming, at least in part, from numerous myths depicting the stepmother as evil, notorious, and wicked. Literature philosophically has portrayed this family form as a deviant social structure, a form of existence sought by none, held in esteem by relatively few, and pitied by many. With undefined roles for all members of the stepfamily, and particularly the stepfather (Cherlin, 1978; Kampora, 1980), the complex and contradicting functions of stepparents are further clouded by the absence of accepted forms of address. Stepparents are referred to as Mr. or Mrs., Mom the Second, a First Name, Poppa instead of Dad or Father,and, regretfully, My Father's Wife and Hey You!

The literature has not yielded a sympathetic picture of interaction patterns within the stepfamily. Rankin (1983) found misconduct to be strongly influenced by the number of absent biological parents and the presence of a stepparent. In fact, of the children living in intact homes, those in stepfamilies have more conduct problems and, more specifically, children in mother and stepfather homes tend to have more socialized delinquency than do children from intact nuclear families (Touliatos, 1980).

Physical violence is also more common in stepfamilies than in other family structures. Child abusers are most often stepparents or fathers (Lennington, 1981). The most frequently attacked member of an immediate family is a mother or stepmother (Kratcoski, 1982).

Rivalry and jealously among stepsiblings are affected by the number of children in the stepfamily: that is, as the number of children in the stepfamily increases, so does the opportunity for non-productive behavior (Visher & Visher, 1978). However, no single variable accounts for the social difficulties that are apt to surface for either children or parents when the stepfamily forms. The children's age (Duberman, 1973), length of time in the stepfamily (Visher & Visher, 1978; Lutz, 1980); living arrangements (Duberman, 1973); visitation practices (Kalter, 1978); and parental age and partner support (Schulman, 1972) are all important factors that shape the interaction patterns within this complex family subsystem.

Society continues to support the stepfamily fairy-tale myths, yet this family structure dates to at least Greek mythology. Schools, the main transmitter of cultural mores, have not kept abreast of changing and acceptable nuclear family variations. What children read in classrooms continues to highlight the more traditional family structures and avoid inclusion of the "other families" represented in the same classrooms. In 1981, Sutton examined seven basal readers. Three random family situations were selected from each book and then categorized as 2 parent, 1 parent, significant adults, and

siblings. The results showed that the number of times many family situations were portrayed reflected current population statistics. However, there was not a single mention of stepparents or stepfamilies, few references to working mothers, and only one reference to a noncustodial parent (Sutton, 1981). More recently, following an analysis of 462 stories of family life in eight basal readers appropriate for grades 1 through 6, it was concluded that the typical American family continues to be shown as having two parents, two children, and a house in the suburbs (Conway, 1983).

Society's tendency to place a premium on the nuclear family creates a burden for the stepfamily. Confused kinship loyalties (Jones, 1978), a lack of legal underpinnings, conflicting roles and allegiances, and the anxiety apt to be found among all members of a stepfamily (Colvin, 1981) highlight the need for extensive research centered on stepfamilies. It is important that society understand that the stepfamily need not differ along critical dimensions related to healthy family functioning (Kupisch, 1983). In fact, stepfamily living need not be any more stressful (Strother, 1981) than any other, more traditional, form of family style.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions and characteristics of stepfamilies held by members of this family structure. Specifically, a two-part survey was developed and administered to persons presently or previously married. Part I of the survey was completed by all respondents and Part II of the survey was completed only by parents in a stepfamily. Data were analyzed using SPSS-X computer programs.

METHOD

Subjects

All married or previously married graduate students enrolled Winter Quarter, 1986, in an evening graduate course in the School of Education of an urban, Southern college comprised the sample. The sample consisted of 151 subjects; 115 (76.2%) were female and 36 (23.8%) were male. 84.1% of all respondents were white; 13.2% were black; 1.3% were hispanic; and 1.3% were oriental.

Instrument

Part I of the survey consisted essentially of census data on race, sex, marital status, and identification as a parent and/or stepparent. Five questions in Part II of the survey categorized the particular type of stepfamily; the remaining thirty-one questions examined previous research findings focusing on attitudes, perceptions, and feelings held by stepparents. Subjects were asked to respond across five categories, including "Strongly Agree", "Agree", "No Opinion", "Disagree", and "Strongly Disagree".

Procedure

Course instructors for all classes that met at 4 o'clock or later were requested to distribute surveys to qualifying students. The evening graduate population consisted of 320 enrolled seats. Because many students typically enroll in more than 1 course, instructions stated that surveys were limited to those students who met the stated criteria and who had not already completed a survey in another classroom. (A total of 250

surveys were printed; 151 students (60.4%) completed and returned part I. Of that number, 15 students (10%) also completed part II of the survey, which contained 36 questions targeted directly at stepparents. A copy of the survey may be obtained by writing the authors.)

Survey results were tabulated on individual report forms (N=151). The SPSS Crosstab program was used to analyze the data. Percents were calculated for all response categories and Chi square test statistic was used to determine significance between pairs of variables at the .05 level.

RESULTS

Not surprisingly, a significant relationship was found between age and parenting for all respondents, with age ranges of 31 to 35 and 36 to 40 having the highest incidence of parenting. Responses indicated that 68.9% (104) were natural or adoptive parents, while 9.3% indicated they were a stepparent.

When subjects were asked their marital status, 15.2% were divorced, 1.3% were separated, 63.9% were in their first marriage, 13.9% were in their second marriage, 2% were in their third marriage, and 2.6% were widowed. A significant relationship (.0001) was also found between age and marital status in that people marry people of similar age.

Of all respondents, 9.3% were parents in a stepfamily, with tha age range of 36 to 40 being most common (26.7%), although fairly equal distribution of ages spannes 26 through 50 years (13.3% in ages 41 to 45 and 20% in all the other age ranges. The spouses of these subjects also were of similar age, with the

range of 36 to 40 being most common (33.3%). Females (66.7% of parents in stepfamilies) were also more prevalent in this sample.

When parents in Stepfamilies were asked to select a preferred name for their family structure, "combined family" (28.6%), followed by "stepfamily" (21.4%) and "merged family" (14.3%) were the preferred family lables. Although "blended family" is appearing more frequently in professional literature, only 7.1% indicated a preference for this term.

Describing the composition of their household, 50% of the respondents indicated a mother, father, and 2 sets of children; 28.6% represented a mother, her children, and a stepfather; and 14.3% consisted of a stepmother, father, and his children. In most instances (50%) the stepfamily had existed over 6 years. Divorce (92.9%) was cited as the primary reason for forming the stepfamily and 66.7% were in their second marriage.

First names (64.3%) were the chief forms of address used by stepchildren to address their stepparents. Typical parent names, including Mom, Dad, Mother, and Father, were second, but accounted for only 28.6% of the stepfamilies.

Several significant relationships were found among the variables under study. Table 1, below, presents these data.

(insert Table 1 about here)

Significant relationships were found between the parents in stepfamilies and their responses to items requesting perceptions and attitudes toward stepfamilies. Table 2, below, shows the

statement and corresponding significant variable.

(insert Table 2 about here)

Perceived family dynamics have played a large role in the myths directed toward the stepfamily. The role of living arrangements was examined to determine its impact on the parents. In this sample, parents in stepfamilies strongly agreed or agreed that stepparenting was easier if the stepparent did not have to compete with a living natural parent (64.3%) and/or if no former spouse was in contact with the children (57.2%). 42.9 % of the stepparents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that "stepchildren are easier to get along with if they are not living in the household" (42.9%). In fact, most felt that stepchildren made a better adjustment to the stepparent if they lived with that stepparent (64.3%). When stepsiblings were involved, the parents in stepfamilies believed they made a better adjustment to each other more quickly when living in the same household (71.4%). They overwhelmingly stated that they, as stepparents, could not be expected to instantly love or accept the stepchildren (85.7%).

When asked to respond to the statement "stepmothering is more difficult than stepfathering", 50% agreed or strongly agreed. This is possibly because they also held the opinion that children accepted stepfathers more readily than stepmothers (57.1%), and that many stepmothers developed attitudes of rejection toward their stepchildren (53.9%). Most (78.6%) agreed with the statement "no one can follow in the steps of a natural mother without some problems".

The role of the stepmother as the underlying cause of family troubles was explored. When asked to respond to the statement "the stepmother is typically viewed by her stepchildren and others as the person responsible for the breakup of the former family," 42.8% disagreed. However, 71.4% agreed that her role and status were dependent on the support of her husband. When asked to compare the 2 roles, stepfathering and stepmothering, less than half of the respondents disagreed (46.2%) with the statement that the role of the stepfather was more difficult than the role of the stepmother.

78.5% of the sample knew there were more stepfathers than stepmothers. There was general disagreement with the statement that stepfathers were less effective parents than natural fathers (57.2%), although they (57.1%) did not agree that discipline for the stepfather was more of a problem than for natural fathers. When given the statement that "stepfathers have more affectionate relationships with their stepchildren than do stepmothers," 53.8% had no opinion with the remaining equally distributed between agreement and disagreement.

Most (71.4%) of the responsents had no opinion or disagreed that a man is apt to remarry for love of a woman and her children than a woman is for the same reason. Ties to the first family were believed to remain dominant for stepchildren (according to 78.6% of the respondents) and most (71.5%) felt that the establishment of a parental relationship between stepparent and child was difficult and trying. It is interesting to note that 46.2% of the stepparents had no opinion regarding difficulty

establishing relationships with part-time stepchildren. The majority (71.5%) reported that prior affections and allegiances made coping difficult for stepchildren and that the stepparent was not a replacement for the natural parent. Responses were evenly divided regarding recognition by the child for what the stepparent does.

Problems concerning visitation and custody difficulties frequently arise in stepfamilies; 57.1% agree, although no strong feelings were reported and 42.9% had no opinion. Of greater impact in stepfamilies, however, was the problem of child support that concerned 64.3% of respondents. The most significant problem perceived by the stepparents concerned previous spouses in that more than three-fourths (78.6%) believed that ex-wives and ex-husbands frequently exerted influence on the children to reject the other natural parent or stepparent.

Stress within families typically arises from the perceptions of family members toward one another. In stepfamilies, children are believed to tolerate mistakes made by a natural parent more than from a stepparent (71.5% agreement). They are seen as frustrated with a stepparent more often than with a natural parent (64.3% agreement), and as torn between allegiance for a natural parent and stepparent (71.4%). Some stepparents (57.1%) observed that stepfamily problems typically arise after a visit with a natural parent.

DISCUSSION

This study showed several commonalities between parents in stepfamilies and parents in other family structures in that the descriptive statistics are very similar for parents in stepfamilies and in all other families. A significant relationship was found between age and both parenting and stepparenting, with the age ranges of 31-35, and 36-40 having the highest incidence for both groups. This is not surprising, especially since in higher education the heaviest graduate population age range is in this same age bracket.

A second commonality showed significance between the age of both parents, and between parental age and marital status in both stepfamilies and all other family structures. This indicates that people marry and remarry persons close to their own age, thereby keeping the age of stepparents similar to that of parenting.

Current statistics indicate that about 13% of all children are members of a stepfamily, yet this survey found that only 9.3% of all parents to be stepparents. This suggests that parents in a stepfamily are apt to have more children in their care than do parents in other family styles. The implications of a higher ratio of parent to child have not been examined in previous literature beyond the acknowledged relationships between both misconduct and sibling rivalry, and the stepfamily. Since the dominant type of stepfamily consisted of 2 parents and 2 sets of children, the ratio of parent to child is likely to be of much greater significance in furthering an understanding of the dynamics of family interaction in the stepfamily than in other

family structures.

In this study, most stepfamilies were preceded by divorce, which suggests that the absent parent is living. This may be a major factor in stepchildren not giving typical parental names to the newly acquired parent. Child support, visitation, and former spouse influence on the children are likely related variables.

Three variables were identified as significant in stepfamily success: time, stepsiblings, and former spouse. All agreed that stepparenting was easier when no former spouse was in contact with the children. Since there were more stepmothers than stepfathers in this study, the problems with a former spouse and child support may be intervening variables. However, they also acknowledged that no one could follow in the steps of the natural mother without some problems.

The length of time the stepfamily had existed was significant and, of the females, 55.6% had been in the stepfamily over 6 years. Apparently, the longer the stepfamily has been in existence, the more successful is the adjustment. This suggests that, with time, family members come to adjust to new patterns and become tolerant of new family members. This is perceived to be facilitated when stepsiblings live in the same house.

The role of all stepfamily members remains unclear. The stepmother's role and her status are believed dependent upon the support of the husband, which reflects traditional values of the nuclear family. Feelings behind the remarriage are also unclear. Significant disagreement exists among the respondents regarding marraige for love and marriage for other reasons. Mothers and

stepmothers feel that ties to the first family are best to remain dominant for the stepchildren, while child support problems frequently arise as an added burden.

Although there are many similarities between stepfamilies and more traditional families, the myth of the stepfamily continues. Roles of family members are unclear, making it difficult for individuals to interact on any clear dimension. Perseverance over time appears to be a mechanism leading toward a successful family perception. Contemporary financial support problems can overshadow problems of custody, visitation, and interaction.

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TABLE ONE:

Chi Square Coefficients and Degrees of Freedom
Between Significant Variables

Variables	Chi Square Coefficient	Degrees of Freedom	Level of Significance
Age/Stepparenting	17.37	7	.01
Age/Parenting	56.15	14	.00
Age/Spouse Age	343.28	63	.00
Stepparent Age/ Spouse Age	30.43	16	.01
Age/Marital Status	83.57	42	.00
Stepparenting/Marital Status	36.36	6	.00
Stepparenting/Sex	5.81	1	.01
Stepfamily Label/Reason For Stepfamily	14.00	5	.01
Stepfamily Label/Age	16.85	8	.03
Longevity of Stepfamily/Sex	7.77	3	.05

TABLE TWO:

Chi Square Coefficients and Degrees of Freedom
Between Significant Statements and Variables
For Parents in Stepfamilies

Statement Stmt. #	Item	Variable	Chi Square	df	Level of Significance
6	Stepparenting is easier if a stepparent does not have to compete with a living natural parent	Stepparenting Age	21.87	12	.002
7	Stepparenting is easier if no exspouse is in contact with the child(ren)	Divorce or preceding stepfamily	14.00	4	.007
10	Stepsiblings make a better adjustment to each other more quickly when living in the same household	Divorce or divorce preceding stepfamily	14.00	3	.002
		longivity of stepfamily	18.99	9	.025
11	Stepparents cannot be expected to instantly love or accept the stepchildren	Divorce or divorce preceding stepfamily	6.46	2	.039
15	No one can follow in the steps of the natural mother without some problems	Stepparenting	9.54	3	.022
16	The stepmother is typically viewed by her stepchildren as the person responsible for the break-up of the former family	Stepparenting age	25.66	16	.058

TABLE TWO (contd.)

Statement Stmt. #	Item	Variable	Chi Square	df	Level of Significance
17	The stepmother's role and status are dependent upon the support of her husband	Stepparenting	8.72	3	.033
22	A man is more apt to remarry for love of a woman and her children than is a woman for these same reasons	Stepparenting	9.24	4	.055
23	For stepchildren, ties to the first family remain dominant	Sex of stepparent	7.46	3	.058